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WASHINGTON TODAY: Heckling the President Isn't What it Used to Be
 By TOM RAUM

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WASHINGTON (AP) - President Bush recently counseled Mikhail S. Gorbachev to shrug off the heckling he got at a May Day parade, suggesting the Soviet leader "ought to come join some of the parades I go to."

But actually Bush has had it easy. Signs waved in his face are just as likely to make whimsical comments about broccoli these days as denounce U.S. policy in Central America.

And some hecklers have gone so far as to buy tickets to gain legal admission to Republican fund-raisers - a form of protest that activists of the 1960s and 70s would never have dreamed of doing.

As he crisscrosses the country giving speeches and raising funds for Republican candidates, Bush is seldom confronted with the angry crowds that dogged and sometimes drowned out other presidents.

It may be a sign of the times, but protesters don't seem very angry these days.

Last Sunday, Bush was on his way to a speech in Portland, Ore., when a passenger train drew abreast of his motorcade on tracks that paralleled the highway. Two passengers, a man and a woman, recognized the president and both began making obscene gestures at him from the train window.

This went on for several minutes as the train and motorcade kept precise pace. Bush looked at the couple and nodded politely. Finally, the two stopped gesturing and both began waving at the president. "Hello Mr. President," the words formed by the woman said.

A crowd of 150 to 200 demonstrators burned flags and newspapers the next day outside the hotel in downtown Portland where Bush was speaking.

There were a few arrests of those starting the fires. But for the most part, the crowd broke up peacefully when police moved in.

The signs carried by the protesters covered a range of subjects. Some protested Bush's environmental record. Others dealt with AIDS, the homeless, U.S. support for El Salvador. One targeted administration tax policy: "If his lips are moving, he's lying."

And that was one of the biggest demonstrations Bush had seen in months.

With the mixture of messages, protesters don't seem to be very organized.

At an event earlier this week in Los Angeles, where Bush gave a neighborhood speech praising community anti-drug efforts, one heckler within easy earshot of Bush screamed: "Contras. Cocaine. El Salvador. It's all your fault."

CONTINUED

Page 15

Bush looked at him quizzically. ``Oliver North. The CIA. The homeless,`` the man shouted, repeating the same words over and over again.

Bush shrugged. Others in the crowd told the man to keep quiet. At two fund-raisers this year, hecklers who interrupted Bush's speeches turned out to have purchased tickets to get in - at several hundred dollars apiece.

More often than not, demonstrators at Bush's speeches complain for a few minutes, then sit down and keep quiet.

Protesters who show up at Bush events most frequently complain about U.S. support for El Salvador, Bush's anti-abortion stance and his position on feminist issues. There also usually are several signs calling attention to environmental issues or lamenting levels of spending on AIDS research and for the homeless.

But there also are more and more broccoli signs.

Ever since Bush declared war on broccoli, there have been a myriad of broccoli signs at Bush events, some of them nasty, most of them good-natured. One proclaimed ``Bush Beats Broccoli`` and bore a cartoon of Bush in boxing trunks, standing victoriously over a fallen broccoli stalk.

Restaurants sometimes bear signs with variations on this theme: ``We don't serve broccoli, come on in Mr. President.``

Bush's tendency to meet with various interest groups may help mute some of the criticism - even though it may also spawn it in some unexpected areas.

The president's decision to include several gay rights activists at a White House ceremony to sign legislation to crack down on so-called ``hate crimes`` won him plaudits from gay organizations.

But partly as a result of those invitations, Baptists withdrew an invitation to Bush to speak at their convention this June in New Orleans.